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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 008505

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PINS TU

SUBJECT: TURKEY'S NEW DEFENSE MINISTER: VECDI GONUL

REF: A. ANKARA 8382

1B. ANKARA 8252

1C. ANKARA 8448

(U) Classified by DCM Robert Deutsch. Reason: 1.5 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary: GOT DefMin Gonul's principal political task is to ensure smooth relations between his Islam-influenced AK Party and a Turkish military which as adopted a wait-and-see attitude while remaining on the lookout for any sign AK might try to alter the current status of civilian-military relations. The cautious Gonul has the respect of the Kemalists, but his private criticisms of the military establishment suggest he will at a minimum try to effect change at the margins to promote greater civilian oversight of the Turkish Armed Forces' (TAF) budgetary and other processes. End summary.

Gonul the State's-man?

12. (C) Turkish Defense Minister Mehmet Vecdi Gonul is a long-time Embassy contact. His vast experience (below) with the organs of the state -- and the Deep State (refs A,B) -- have earned him the confidence of many in the Kemalist Establishment. Gonul also served in the military with President Sezer, a classic bonding experience. As a result, he is considered by Kemalists to be one of the most "acceptable" senior figures in the Islam-influenced AK (Justice and Development) Party government.

3 (C) It was a given that, as a former high civil servant, Gonul would figure prominently in any AK government to help mollify a wary Establishment. We understand that Erdogan's initial thinking was to hold him as an alternate P.M. candidate in the event that Sezer rejected first choice Abdullah Gul; then to pick him as AK's candidate for parliamentary Speaker (thwarted by the challenge from AK number three Bulent Arinc, ref C); then to appoint him as FonMin. In any event, Gonul's principal political task as DefMin will be to manage AK's relations with Turkey's politically powerful generals. As DefMin, a notoriously weak position with little direct control over military matters (its chief function is defense procurement), Gonul will function principally as a liaison between the TAF and AK, the elected civilian government, and Parliament.

14. (C) Nevertheless, Gonul exhibits some of the traits frowned on in elite society but appreciated in his native Kocaeli Province and elsewhere in conservative Anatolia.

15. (C) First, we have on good authority that Gonul has ties to the Naksibendi tarikat. This is a nominally illegal sufi Islamic order, generally dominated by Kurds and characterized now by tendencies toward quietism and serious religious piety. Gonul's patron, the late P.M./President Turgut Ozal of the Motherland Party (ANAP) was a Naksibendi, as was Ozal's Islamist brother Korkut -- a long-time Embassy contact and senior Naksi figure in his own right. Gonul is reportedly close to Korkut. In private meetings with us, Gonul has evinced a remarkably intimate understanding of tarikat history -- he sees the orders as a natural part of Anatolian society -- and the current trends in tarikat politics in Turkey.

16. (C) Second, Gonul has repeatedly offered to us a strong and comprehensive critique of military spending and budgetary practices -- particularly the problems of accountability and lack of legislative oversight of these processes. Gonul, like senior politicians from traditional centrist parties, alleges that upwards of 40% of military expenditures is completely unaccounted for, due largely to the TAF practice

of paying for military programs through a variety of off-budget "funds" -- about which civilians know little. The day before he became Defense Minister, Gonul noted to us that given the "sensitivities" of the generals, the AK government is not eager to push hard for transparency and reform in these areas any time soon (we have heard much the same from other senior AK officials). Nevertheless, he has hinted at an indirect approach to imposing fiscal discipline on the TAF as part of AK's across-the-board effort to end corruption and promote accountability in the bureaucracy.

17. (C) General bio data:

-- Born in Erzincan in eastern Turkey in 1939, Gonul graduated from Ankara U. Political Sciences faculty (then the premier training ground for future high civil servants) 1962, later earning an M.S. in Public Administration from University of Southern California.

-- He then returned to Turkey and joined the Interior Ministry. After service as an inspector and finishing first in his class of entering sub-governors, he served until 1970 as a sub-governor in seven districts. Worked in Interior Ministry 1970-72. Finishing first in the 1972 national inspector exam, he was appointed to the inspector corps. Appointed governor of Kocaeli (Izmit) in 1976, assigned to directorate general of security (National Police) in 1977, Central Governorship 1978, Ankara governor 1979, founding member of High Education Council 1981, set up by the then military regime to promote Kemalist propriety in the universities. 1984 appointed Izmir governor, 1988 Interior Ministry Undersecretary (under Minister Abdulkadir Aksu, again Interior Minister in the new AK cabinet), 1991-98 chairman of the Sayistay (Court of Accounts). Gonul owed his rise in part to his association with the Ozals. 1999 elected to Parliament (his candidacy reflected Fazilet's own abortive effort to move the Islamist movement to the political center) and chosen as deputy Speaker. After Fazilet was closed by the courts, Gonul abandoned Erbakan in 2001, joining Erdogan's AK at its founding and is a vice chairman. Chosen in 2001 as a member of the Turkish delegation to the Assembly of the Council of Europe.

-- Married -- his wife does not wear the Islamic headscarf -- with two sons, one daughter; Gonul speaks English fluently.

PEARSON